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SUBJECT: PAKISTAN'S LEVEL OF PREPAREDNESS TO RESPOND TO UG99 WHEAT FUNGUS (C-TN8-00647)

REF: STATE 38788

¶1. (U) The following is a response to the Department's request for information on the Government of Pakistan's (GOP) level of preparedness for a possible outbreak of UG99 wheat stem rust.

¶2. (SBU) Summary: While wheat stem rust is not a new phenomenon in Pakistan, UG99 presents a serious challenge to Pakistan's already suffering wheat industry. Pakistan's scientific community clearly understands the threat the virus poses to the country's wheat production. There have been no confirmed reports of UG99 in Pakistan. While multiple efforts are currently underway to integrate rust-resistant strains into commercial production, Pakistan's wheat crops remain vulnerable to infection. Local farmers remain mostly ignorant of the risk that UG99 poses to Pakistan's annual wheat production. End Summary.

¶3. (SBU) Wheat rust is not new to Pakistan. The country faced its first challenge in 1977 when a rust epidemic decimated wheat crops and forced the GOP to import over two million tons of wheat to meet domestic demand. Following the 1977-78 outbreak, Pakistan established strong linkages with research institutions such as the Mexico-based International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT) and the Syria-headquartered International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA). Pakistani plant breeders have been receiving germplasms from these centers for use in wheat strain breeding programs.

¶4. (SBU) Pakistan's 2008-09 wheat production is forecast at 21.5 million metric tons, well below the 23 million metric tons needed to meet domestic demand. The GOP's lack of a coordinated commodity policy, water shortages and production overestimates are to blame for the discrepancy. If forecasts prove to be true, the GOP will have to import around 1.5 million metric tons of wheat in 2008-09. Although the country produced a record 23.5 million metric tons of wheat in 2006, cross border trade and smuggling pushed Pakistan's wheat stockpile below 22.5 million metric tons, prompting price increases and widespread wheat flour shortages.

¶5. (SBU) Despite a good 2007-08 harvest, Pakistan remained in the grip of the wheat crisis, importing 1.7 million metric tons. Due to price supports, the cost of wheat in Pakistan is among the cheapest in the world, currently trading at USD 252 per metric ton. The relative low price of Pakistani wheat increases the incentive to smuggle wheat to neighboring India, Iran and Afghanistan, further exacerbating the domestic wheat shortages.

¶6. (SBU) According to a survey conducted by the Pakistan Agriculture Research Council (PARC) there is a low overall incidence of wheat stem rust and only one suspected case of UG99. The case, reported in

the wheat producing southern province of Sindh, proved to be a domestic strain of wheat rust and not UG99. Pakistani farmers have not reported any unusual crop yield problems or unexplained losses this year. Dr Mujeeb Qazi, Director of Pakistan's National Wheat Program, reports that the swift movement of UG99 from Yemen to Iran has raised alarm bells among Pakistan's scientific community. Pakistani researchers will have to expedite efforts to protect wheat productivity over the next crop cycle (2008-09) by introducing UG99-resistant wheat strains. Warning against complacency, Dr. Qazi reported that recent testing of Pakistani wheat germplasms indicates that Pakistani strains do not currently possess adequate resistance to the disease. Recognizing the threat of UG99, PARC and the National Wheat Program have called for a national policy to prepare for possible outbreaks.

17. (SBU) The GOP is currently working with CIMMYT and ICARDA to develop biotechnology-enhanced strains with molecular markers and haploids to increase crop resistance to wheat rust. The Pakistan Agriculture Research Council (PARC) and the National Wheat Program are working on a three-prong strategy to protect Pakistani wheat crops from UG99. The first tier involves the introduction of high-yield germplasms into commercial wheat strains. Field tests have indicated that these germplasms, provided by CIMMYT, are resistant to UG99. PARC is also utilizing breeding lines from the international stem rust screening nursery for integration into commercial wheat crops. Thirdly, agricultural scientists hope to identify rust-resistant plant genes and incorporate them into wheat strains via traditional plant breeding programs.

18. (SBU) Disease surveillance programs are also already underway. The GOP has allocated Rs 40 million (USD 645,000) to combat a possible outbreak. Funds will be used to upgrade national plant disease response capacity through research programs, laboratory

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improvements and increased personnel training. The GOP will also establish a wheat rust early warning system and continue to test commercial wheat strains.

19. (SBU) Despite these efforts, the GOP currently has no plans to educate farmers about the dangers of UG99. Farmers are generally unaware of the problem and have not publicly raised concerns about the threat the disease poses to Pakistan's annual wheat production.

10. (SBU) Comment: The risk of a wheat rust infestation couldn't come at a worse time for Pakistan. Even without an outbreak of UG99, Pakistan is in the grip of a wheat crisis with unmet demand and skyrocketing prices. The GOP spent over USD 720 million to import wheat last year; with budget overruns currently nearing USD 8.3 billion, the GOP cannot afford to foot an even larger import bill this year. While Pakistan's agricultural scientists are well aware of the threat that UG99 poses to domestic crops, farmers are woefully unaware of the looming threat. Efforts to integrate rust-resistant wheat strains are a good first step but would provide little relief if UG99 arrives in Pakistan in the near future. End Comment.

PATTERSON